

## Short writing assignment #1 feedback by James H. Faghmous

Overall the class exhibited several common misunderstandings than could be grouped under three broad categories: (1) understanding the assignment; (2) understanding the role of a summary; (3) understanding the content of a summary. In this session, we will go over these categories to improve our understanding of each.

### UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT

#### 1. Read the assignment

Before diving into the assigned article, you must thoroughly read the assignment first. Not knowing what is expected of you will certainly result in not meeting our expectations.

*You are working for a software company that has followed a traditional waterfall development process. There is lots of emphasis on formal, written communication, but not much active back-and-forth informal communication. Your company is being squeezed by competitors that seem to be able to solve problems more quickly and seem to be more in tune with customer needs. Clearly something needs to change. You happen across Alistair Cockburn's article "Software Development as a Cooperative Game" and come to the realization that there might be a better way of organizing your work that would make your company more competitive. When you mention it to your manager, she seems interested and asks you to write a brief summary of the article that she can share with her peers, who don't have the patience to read the full article.*

Common mistakes:

- **Writing as if it was your original work.** You are simply asked to summarize the article. Don't waste time and energy trying to make it sound like your own creative work.
- **Narrating, instead of summarizing the article.** As stated in the assignment, the board members have no time or patience to read the original article. You must then reduce the size of the article by only presenting crucial information.
- **Writing for the wrong audience.** You are writing a summary for your supervisor and her peers. This means they already know that communication or cooperation (two concepts highly emphasized in the paper) are crucial to the company's success. Instead, you must present which aspects of these components are crucial for your company. In other words, what can your company learn from the article to make itself more competitive?
- **Providing valuable feedback without summarizing the article.** Although you may communicate the key ideas of the article to your supervisor without summarizing the article, this won't be enough. The goal of this assignment is to demonstrate the ability to clearly summarize a technical article. These are

growing pains of a computer scientists. Unless you do it, you don't truly understand it!

## 2. Read the instructions

Carefully read the instructions (under the Format, Length and Style section). Failure to follow simple guidelines will almost certainly result in your disqualification from any competition (job search, graduate school, scholarships, etc.)

Common mistakes:

- Not pasting the grading rubric at the end of the assignment.
- Going over the page limit.
- Using the wrong font-type, -size, or color.
- Citing the article when you were asked not to.

## 3. Know the expectations

After familiarizing yourself with the assignment and the guidelines, you must know what is expected from you (in terms of writing.) As a general rule, **you should always write your articles with the grading rubric in mind**. You should have the rubric in front of you at all times when writing to ensure you are staying on track. You should also take notes during my lectures as I always emphasize what I am looking for in your writing.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF A SUMMARY**

Summarizing is the process of rewriting an article or passage, in **your own words**, to make it **shorter**, while **retaining its essential message**. As a computer scientist you may write any of the following summaries in your career:

- A letter of transmittal, which provides an overview of a document you produced so others can use it.
- An abstract of your work (research paper, technical report, etc.)
- An executive summary, which is a brief nontechnical summary directed to a supervisor
- A conclusion, which draws together a complicated discussion (such as in your research papers.)

Common mistakes:

- *Numerous lengthy quotes from the original article.* Keep in mind that repeatedly quoting from the text is similar to making your boss read the original paper. It is best to read the article or the section you wish to summarize, then put it away while you write the summary in your own terms.
- If you must quote a long passage in your summary, please cite the article and page number in case your supervisor would like to find the quote in the original text (e.g. Cockburn p.5).

- ***Don't use every single example the author used.*** The goal of your summary is to simplify the article. This means that if you did your job well, you won't need any examples for clarification. Try to limit yourself to only crucial example, if needed.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE CONTENT OF A SUMMARY**

A summary is not an essay and should not be structured as such. In your summary you should only provide the following:

- An introduction where you **state the article's thesis** and its **key supporting arguments**. You may also lay out the structure of what is to follow.
- A discussion of **every supporting argument you listed in your introduction**, while emphasizing the thesis.
- A conclusion that ties everything together (optional)

First, read the article and identify its thesis (what makes Cockburn's paper different from all the other methodologies articles?), then try to group his supporting arguments into logical groups and spend some time summarizing the contents of each group.

Although this is by no means the only way to write a summary., it is its simplest most widely-accepted form. For the sake of this assignment, you may add in your summary suggestions for your supervisors to improve the company based on the information you are presenting.

Common mistakes:

- Students who spent too much time talking about the author's background did not identify the thesis in the introduction.
- **The thesis should be in the introduction** not buried in the middle of the article.
- You don't have to review the article in the same order it was presented. You decide how your summary should flow!
- Don't summarize any sections that are not crucial to understanding the article's thesis.
- Spend a single section on each supporting argument.
- Don't narrate the article (e.g. "His first point was,... His second point was ...")

## **GENERAL COMMON MISTAKES**

These are general comments that I wanted to share with the class:

- Keep your writing simple. Avoid the urge of being poetic or creative.
- You must present which **aspects** of each critical component the author emphasized. Obviously, communication, cooperation, etc, are crucial to a project. But which aspects of communication, etc. does he emphasize?
- Avoid short ambiguous sentences that don't make sense out of context (e.g. communication is never complete)
- Check your summary against the original article for accuracy and emphasis